

Los Angeles Times

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Chatsworth, CA 91311
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August 6, 1993

The Editor
The New York Times Book Review
229 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Quick! Stop those presses! Get me rewrite! Send reinforcements of fact-checkers to Oxford University Press! Somebody tell E. Culpepper Clark, author of "The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama" (Aug. 1) that George Wallace could not have blocked the enrollment of two black students at the university in 1963 -- in defiance of a federal court order.

Reason: Those very students had been secretly enrolled the day before in a federal judge's chambers in Birmingham, 60 miles away -- a ploy that ultimately gave a political nudge to both sides, Mr. Wallace and the Kennedy Administration.

This wasn't so much a showdown as it was showtime. The pre-enrollment would be confirmed by the university's admissions records and by interviews with both students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, as well as Dr. Frank Rose, the university's president in 1963, for a Los Angeles Times article I would write in 1978, published on the 15th anniversary of Mr. Wallace's so-called "stand."

As Vivian Malone Jones in 1978, she said in the interview that she and Mr. Hood had been told only that they were being pre-enrolled for their personal safety. "This has bothered me a great deal....," she said. "I sometimes get the feeling that I was being used. I remember that when I registered and picked out my classes and professors, I wondered, 'Why should I have to go through it all again tomorrow?' But we were too far into it then. We were not in a position to question any plans by the Department of Justice. And my lawyers said, 'This is for your personal safety.' What was uppermost in my mind was my mental anguish, my personal safety and my ambitions of just getting into the university, as opposed to the philosophical reason for Gov. Wallace standing there, or the federal government being there."

Of the federal government's role in the pre-enrollment, Nicholas D. Katzenbach, who as chief deputy to U.S. Atty. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy confronted Wallace at the door to the registration hall on the students' behalf, said: "If I knew it, I don't now recall it."

For his part, Mr. Wallace (through a press spokesman) declined to be interviewed for my report; but when I would ask him in 1979 about the pre-enrollment for a subsequent story about him, he would say that he hadn't known about it until that very interview.

Today, most of our media, as well as historians and educators such as Mr. Clark (and, by extension, your reviewer, Barry Gewen) still foist upon us the myth that this "confrontation" between Mr. Wallace and the Kennedy Administration was for real.

Mr. Clark dismisses my report to the contrary by writing in a footnote that I "read more than justified" into confirmation by Dr. Rose that the students had pre-enrolled. Ha! That's like saying we the people "read more than justified" into Japan's surrender

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at the end of World War II, or that cartographers "read more than justified" into the fact that Maine sits at the northeastern corner of the United States.

Sadly, Mr. Clark -- a professor of history, yet! -- joins those who skew history and snub logic. For what purpose? He misses, or ignores, the point that it's impossible to block someone's enrollment when enrollment has already occurred.

By not exploring in depth the enrollment on June 10 -- and by not addressing the "confrontation" on June 11 as the charade, if not sham, it was -- he writes a book that says, in effect, that the canary ate the cat, the minnow swallowed the shark and Gen. George Armstrong Custer stormed through Little Big Horn, shouting, "Take no prisoners!" Accordingly, Mr. Clark misses, or ignores, an opportunity to write a book that would have been infinitely more comprehensive and compelling.

To this day, what happened on June 11, 1963, at the University of Alabama, with the world watching on television, stands as an example of manipulation by government, of our media misled and our masses misinformed, of two plus two not quite adding up to four.

It reminds us, too, that no matter how noble the cause or enthralling the moment, what we see isn't always what we get.



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